

# Creative Economy Gets Rolling in Two Maine Communities

Leadership and energy – like gasoline and spark plugs – are the elements that fuel and drive creative economy initiatives in two Maine communities.



A MIDCOAST MAGNET EVENT PARTICIPANT LOOKS AT A DISPLAY HIGHLIGHTING PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE AREA'S CREATIVE ECONOMY.

In sister cities Saco and Biddeford, community leaders launched a Discovery Research effort led by Don Sharland and Andrea Strassner, followed by a cultural planning effort under the guidance of economic development planner David Versel. In Rockland, Noah Keteyian and other community leaders launched a grassroots effort dubbed



Midcoast Magnet to attract new creative energy to their community.

Early on, the Saco and Biddeford planning team recognized that the cultural assets and institutions in their communities are more than 100 years old. Both towns were built by the textile mills and sustained by the wealth of the mills. While the mills once employed 9,000 people, by the late 1950s, most mill jobs had migrated to the southern United States, and later overseas. Today, only about 300 textile workers remain in Biddeford.

When the wealth faded, so did capacity to sustain long-standing arts and cultural institutions. According to Versel, Saco and Biddeford are experiencing a resurgence of arts and culture, allowing the community to rebuild its capacity to maintain cultural resources.

Under Keteyian's leadership, Richard Florida's creative economy research and the Blaine House Conference on Maine's Creative Economy inspired the Midcoast Magnet group. Their advisory board includes legislators, business leaders, young entrepreneurs, professionals and representatives of cultural institutions.

Keteyian said local legislators brought the group together with Governor John Elias Baldacci and the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, which led to a challenge grant that allowed the group to evolve from a grassroots movement to a real organization. From there, they developed a survey that queried residents about creative economy issues in an attempt to learn what is important to the community. Not surprisingly, affordable housing came in high on the list.

Midcoast Magnet planned its first event in November 2004, expecting to attract 30 to 40 people, but 140 people attended. Why such an enthusiastic response? Keteyian says it was the right thing at the right time, "It was a community

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hungry for a vision for what is going to happen."

In Saco and Biddeford, Versel says implementing the creative economy concept is not just about the people involved in arts and culture. "It's about getting businesses on board, getting investors on board, and realizing we're not just doing art for art's sake." The steering committee included representatives from the business community, the financial community and city government.

In fact, Versel describes the Saco-Biddeford cultural plan as a three-legged stool that balances on representation from arts and cultural institutions, the business and civic community, and individual artists.

In January this year, Versel and community leaders organized the *Milling About* event in one of Biddeford's historic textile mills. The event showcased performers, visual artists and craftspeople from throughout the region. Organizers were pleased with the turnout, a crowd of 700 to 1,000 participants. Much of the event's success was due to word-of-mouth and the large number of artists participating.

In addition, Versel says people were curious about the mills. Many Saco and Biddeford residents remember their parents or grandparents working there before the 1950s, but did not have much first-hand knowledge about the mills.

Versel thinks the mills became a focus because, "That's where a lot of the energy is happening." He says there is very little affordable space available in York County, while the mills have hundreds of thousands of square feet available for a fraction of the cost elsewhere. As a result, 60 to 80 painters, sculptors, bookbinders and other artisans moved into the mills. In the past two years, musicians and



Creative Networking  
MAINE ARTS COMMISSION MEMBER  
NOAH KETEYIAN & AND LORA URBANELLI  
CONNECT WITH THE GOVERNOR AT A  
MIDCOAST MAGNET EVENT.

a recording studio have moved in as well.

Midcoast Magnet celebrated its first birthday with a party in March and the release of its report to the community. Participants crowded into an empty store front on Rockland's Main Street to hear Governor Baldacci offer congratulations and recognize the community as a model for meeting economic challenges:

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~ Governor John Elias Baldacci

our own special characteristics—so that when we talk about what are our anchor stores—our anchor stores are our libraries, our museums and our theaters. Each community is different. Each community should be recognized for its differences."

Both groups encountered obstacles to their efforts. In Rockland, Keteyian says the challenge was having a great idea, but not knowing how to implement it. In Saco and Biddeford, Versel says the challenge was getting a diverse group of people organized and moving in the same direction.

There were lessons learned. Keteyian says he discovered much about the community of Rockland itself, including the value of coming up with creative solutions and really innovating in the realm of economic and community development.

Versel says his chief lesson was "Do not skimp on who you have write the plan." He also advises communities not to think too big. Start with the resources you have, and build a realistic plan for the future—and get the partners on board before you start the planning process, he adds. "If you're trying to write a plan and you don't have everybody in the discussion at the beginning, it's going to take a lot longer."

Midcoast Magnet hopes to continue its goal of attracting, retaining and connecting innovative, entrepreneurial businesses. Their current effort includes a college intern program that matches businesses and organizations with students in Maine colleges and universities. The goal is to create a feeder system and develop a pool of potential workers. Looking forward, Saco and Biddeford hope to create a Twin Cities Cultural Council that will develop arts and cultural programs, educational programs, co-op stores and special events for the community. ☐